

Written Testimony of Anthony Geraci
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Before the Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Communities
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Good morning, Chairwoman McCarthy, Ranking Member Platts and members of the Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Communities. My name is Tony Geraci, and I am Director of Food and Nutrition Services for Baltimore City Public Schools.

So why are we here today?

We are here because as we speak America's youth are on a collision course with poor health and chronic disease, the prevalence of which our country has never seen before.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in 2007, 13 percent of high school students were obese and by 2006, the rate of obesity among 6- to 11-year-olds was at 17 percent. As a result, incidence of type 2 diabetes—a disease closely linked with obesity—is on the rise, requiring more than \$174 billion worth of treatment each year. If current trends continue, every third child born in the year 2000 will develop diabetes within his or her lifetime.

This is not what we want for our kids, but the good news is that, as a nation, we can fix this, and we are fixing this in Baltimore.

In Baltimore—a city where 37 percent of public high school students are overweight or at risk of becoming so and 27.5 percent of children live below the poverty line—many of our public school students hated the meals our school system served.

A small group of students, some of them in the room right now, insisted on something better. Inspired by the U.S. Constitution, they worked with their social studies teacher to draft a Cafeteria Bill of Rights, challenged our school board to eat what they were expected to eat every day and met with the head of our school system to talk about changes.

Their work led to much of the following.

We now provide fresh fruit with every lunch we serve. All over Baltimore, students are learning what an actual, locally grown peach tastes like instead of some synthesized peach flavoring. And as of this school year all of the peaches, lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers—all of our fruits and vegetables—come from Maryland farms. We were intentional in getting as much of our food as possible from local sources because we believe that the local tax dollars that support

our school system should circulate and multiply among those very taxpayers. This also means that fewer ingredients make long trips—at great cost to the environment and those tax dollars—over hundreds of miles.

Due in part to those cost savings our more than 80,000 students now have access to fresh fruits and vegetables every school day. Last school year we could guarantee fresh fruit just one day per week.

In 2008, we opened Great Kids Farm, a working organic farm and education center that trains future urban farmers and informed citizens. The site that hosts Great Kids Farm was once an abandoned orphanage founded by a former slave. George Freeman Bragg opened the Maryland home for Friendless Colored Children as a place of opportunity for young black men, a place where they could learn trade skills that would help them be self-sufficient. Over the years, it has had many different incarnations—a segregated school, a nature center, and, before Great Kids Farm, 33 abandoned acres. Filled with the spirit and vision of George Bragg, community members from throughout Baltimore felt it was important to deliver on his original promise. Our vision was to use the farm to connect kids to the origins of food and the resulting agriculture and hospitality jobs associated with it.

Today at Great Kids Farm, children are raising bees, goats, and chicken; using organic farming techniques to grow tomatoes, lettuce, greens and mushrooms; and exploring a few dozen acres of woods, streams and trails. We welcome students on day-long field trips by the busload and train students in-depth. Our Farm to Fork Summer Internship is an eight-week, hands-on course, during which students learn about every aspect of the food supply chain from cultivation to harvesting, marketing, delivery, and, finally, cooking and presentation at premiere local restaurants.

Long outsourced, we're quickly bringing many aspects of food procurement, processing and distribution back in house. Thanks to a \$1.3 million gift from the Mid-Atlantic Dairy Association, we have a fleet of nine refrigerated trucks and milk coolers in all of our schools.

Taking a cue from McDonald's, we introduced not a Happy Meal box but a Healthy Meal Box to our breakfast program: Kids rip open a slickly designed package containing a low-sugar cereal, 100-percent fruit juice, a carton of milk and a whole-grain, high-protein snack. They also have a chance to meet some of their professional sports heroes from the National Football

League's Baltimore Ravens and Major League Baseball's Baltimore Orioles. Within two months, participation in our breakfast program increased four-fold.

We're treating kids like the savvy consumers they are with "No Thank You Bites," one-to-two-ounce servings of items we'd like to consider incorporating into the menu. If a student likes what she tries, great. If not, she simply says, "No thank you." But everyone who works with us to expand their palettes and their minds is rewarded and we listen to their suggestions.

Baltimore has done all of this with a few big ideas, under severe budget constraints, and with strong community support. But how can the federal government help make this type of work possible nation-wide?

Congress can do so by implementing the six recommendations of the National Farm to School Network as it considers reauthorization of federal child nutrition programs.

1. Guarantee funding for competitive, one-time grants that will help schools develop their own farm to cafeteria projects—menus, procurement, and educational and promotional materials that get local produce into schools.
2. Increase the reimbursement rate for all child nutrition programs in line with actual costs.
3. Apply the same high nutritional standards to all foods and beverages sold within schools, even those not covered by the United States Department of Agriculture's school meals program.
4. Encourage purchasing of local fruits and vegetables through the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program.
5. Incorporate language changes in existing Child Nutrition Reauthorization feeding programs to promote increased local food purchasing.
6. Provide mandatory and consistent funding for the Team Nutrition Network to enable a consistent and coordinated nutrition education approach across child nutrition programs.

We need to bring America's kids back to the table, to put them back in touch with honest-to-goodness, un-messed-around-with food; in touch with the earth and the resources that make real food possible; with the wonderful things their bodies can do in clean, open spaces; with each other; and with adults—their parents, grandparents, teachers and neighbors—because food is something that touches us all in the same ways.

Thank you.